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PROMOTION AND STRENGTHENING OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER RELEVANT CONVENTIONS

Collaboration and synergies among Rio conventions for the implementation of the UNCCD

Note by the secretariat

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I. SCOPE OF THIS NOTE

1. This document reports on progress related to the implementation of decision 13/COP.1, which requested the head of the interim secretariat to report on its implementation to the second session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 2). It also intends to suggest further ways to enhance cooperation among conventions signed at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Rio Conference) or as a result of it, as well as other conventions related to sustainable development and relevant to the global effort to combat desertification1/.

2. The introduction and chapter III describe briefly the mandate and rationale to explore further existing synergies between the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and other relevant conventions, in particular, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. It also informs on specific activities undertaken by the UNCCD secretariat in this regard. Chapter IV addresses the scientific and technical linkages between desertification, biodiversity and climate change. Chapter V reviews the main areas for synergies among Rio conventions. The last chapter proposes further steps that could be taken to enhance cooperation among convention secretariats while advancing the effective implementation of each convention. This note was prepared by the UNCCD secretariat with support and input from UNDP/SEED (Sustainable Energy and Environment Division), as a contribution to the follow-up of the UNDP workshop on synergies held in 1997 and subsequent consultations between the CBD and UNFCCC secretariats and UNDP.

II. INTRODUCTION

3. In its article 8, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification explicitly addresses the relationship with other conventions, particularly with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity. Article 8.1 states: "The Parties shall encourage the coordination of activities carried out under this Convention and, if they are Parties to them, under other relevant international agreements, particularly the United Nations Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity, in order to derive maximum benefit from activities under each agreement while avoiding duplication of effort. The Parties shall encourage the conduct of joint programmes, particularly in the fields of research, training, systematic observation and information collection and exchange, to the extent that such activities may contribute to achieving the objectives of the agreements concerned."

4. The Conference of the Parties, in its decision 13/COP.1, requested the head of the interim secretariat "to make all efforts to strengthen further the collaboration with other relevant conventions, in particular the Convention on Biological Diversity, the United Nations Convention on Climate Change and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, as well as other conventions related to sustainable development."

5. At the fourth session of the Conference of the Parties to the CBD, the Parties, by decision IV/2, instructed the CBD secretariat to improve synergies in regards to information exchange with other biodiversity-related conventions and ongoing international information initiatives, and to contribute to the harmonization of the information management of other treaties, and to continue to discuss the possibilities of joint and harmonized approaches with the UNFCCC and UNCCD. Moreover, in its decision IV/7, the Conference underscored that collaboration should be strengthened with UNFCCC and UNCCD in order to advance the effective implementation of CBD. Finally, decision IV/15 reaffirmed the importance of mutually supportive activities under the CBD and activities under other conventions, processes and institutions relevant to the achievement of the Convention's objectives, while avoiding unnecessary duplication of effort.

6. Additionally, at its sixth session the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development expressed interest in promoting synergies between the Rio conventions in order to expedite their implementation and ensure an integrative approach in international efforts to combat global environmental problems. In June 1997, the nineteenth special session of the United Nations General Assembly in its

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1/ For the sake of convenience, all conventions referred to above are called "Rio conventions" throughout this document.

"Programme for the further implementation of Agenda 21" recommended that the conferences of the parties to conventions signed at the Rio Conference or as a result of it, as well as other conventions related to sustainable development, cooperate in exploring ways and means of collaborating in their work to advance the effective implementation of these conventions.

7. In this regard, the UNCCD secretariat has already concluded a memorandum of collaboration with the CBD secretariat and is currently developing one with the Ramsar Convention secretariat, which is expected to be concluded on time for signature at the UNCCD COP 2 in Dakar. Discussions have also been initiated with the UNFCCC secretariat and a similar memorandum is expected to be concluded in early 1999 once the UNCCD secretariat is settled in Bonn. Furthermore, having the synergies in mind as a high priority, the UNCCD secretariat has responded favourably to requests for negotiation of memoranda of collaboration made by organizations also working on the subject, in particular, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) and Global Environment Facility (GEF).

III. THE RATIONALE FOR A JOINT INITIATIVE ON SYNERGIES

8. The rationale to promote and enhance synergies among the Rio 'sustainable development' conventions includes, *inter alia*, the following facts:

(a) They share a common sustainable development approach, they are part of a common process (UNCED) and have close linkages with a common global strategy: Agenda 21; the Rio conventions also share the same basic principles enshrined in the Rio Declaration; the conventions hence present a convergence of objectives for achieving sustainable development;

(b) The three subjects are intimately related on ecological, but also on socio-economic and institutional grounds; several of the policies and measures suggested for achieving the objective of one convention may also contribute to objectives of the others;

(c) Often decision- and policy-makers in charge of implementation of the conventions belong to the same government ministry or government ministries dealing with closely related portfolios; a pragmatic synergy initiative highlighting intersections among convention objectives could shed light on their deliberations and contribute to cost-effective and more efficient ways to achieve convention and sustainable development objectives at the national and local levels;

(d) Finally, their small and flexible secretariat arrangements allow for a rapid and effective team effort upon which to build a long-term-oriented process.

9. In this context, a joint synergy initiative that takes advantage of and builds upon the existing links among the Rio conventions and adds value to their individual implementation processes could also become instrumental in gradually developing partnerships, common approaches and greater collaboration among international instruments dealing with subjects relevant to sustainable development. Key issues related to such a process would include:

(a) The process must be country-driven with the clear ultimate goal of assisting countries in their efforts to pursue sustainable development policies, such as sustainable dryland management. Linkages between conventions must be explored among relevant government agencies.

(b) The need to ensure appropriate coordination, at the global level, of efforts and involvement of organizations within and outside the United Nations system, keeping in mind the issue management system introduced by the Secretary General in 1997 as part of the United Nations reform process2/.

(c) The need to further explore the suggestion made by the recent consultation of the African Ministerial Conference on Environment (AMCEN) on the

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2/ "Renewing the United Nations: A programme for reform" (A/51/950), 14 July 1997, page 80, paragraph 248.

UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol3/ "that synergistic effects among Rio conventions could be maximized through the adoption of subregional and regional projects and programmes."

IV. SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL LINKAGES BETWEEN ISSUES ADDRESSED BY RIO CONVENTIONS4/

10. Desertification affects about one sixth of the world's population, 70 per cent of all drylands, and one third of the total land area in the world. The most tangible impact of desertification, in addition to widespread poverty, is the annual loss of 3.5-4.0 million hectares of agriculturally used lands as a result of the various processes of land degradation around the world. Desertification leads to the forced movement of people because their life-support system has deteriorated. It leads to a reduction in the world's food-producing potential, the destruction of vegetation, and diminution of many plant and animal populations, and eventual loss of species. Further, desertification can increase atmospheric dust, which can then modify the scattering and absorption of solar radiation in the atmosphere.

A. Desertification and biodiversity

11. Two major manifestations of desertification are topsoil erosion and salinization. Dryland soils are generally less fertile than non-dryland soils. Furthermore, any fertility in drylands is concentrated solely in the thin topsoil. When the topsoil is eroded the underlying soil is devoid of organic matter, nutrients and seeds. Vegetation cover protects the topsoil from both water and wind erosion. Topsoil is eroded by (a) removal of the natural vegetation through various natural and human-induced processes, and (b) transformation of rangeland to cropland in which the vegetation-cover properties of the crop are inferior to those of the preceding rangeland. Once erosion occurs, it is difficult to restore the natural vegetation even if the causes of erosion have been removed because the topsoil, which contains the ingredients for fertility, is already lost. This irreversibility epitomizes desertification.

12. The reduction of vegetation cover also increases albedo - the reflectance properties of the soil surface. Under specific circumstances, increased albedo reduces local precipitation, exacerbating the desertification processes. Thus, vegetation is a key factor in desertification. Its loss brings about desertification, and desertification prevents its regeneration.

Biological diversity, vegetation diversity and desertification

13. In rangelands, the critical "living organisms" are the pasture plant species. The variability among these plant species is essential for the sustainability of livestock farming. For example, a grazing animal requires a balanced diet provided by an appropriate mixture of pasture species that can maintain the herd throughout the year. Secondly - especially in the drylands - livestock herds comprise several species, with different dietary preferences, all foraging in the same range. Therefore, the greater the diversity of forage species, the higher the profitability of dryland livestock economy. Finally, the within-species variability of range species is often critical; a single range species may have several varieties, each with different properties and diverse benefits. Rangelands, vegetation and livestock are ecological complexes which include the variability among living organisms of all sources. In desertified ecosystems the biodiversity is damaged to the extent that it can no longer sustain human livelihoods based on free ranging livestock. Desertification therefore results in the diminution of the productivity potential of the land, leading to loss of biological diversity.

14. The complex architecture of both the above-ground vegetation and the below-ground root systems protects topsoil from the impact of rain and wind. Since dryland plant species depend on the soil for water and nutrients, it is conceivable that the plant diversity in a dryland ecosystem contributes not only to the protection of biodiversity but also to protecting topsoil from erosion.

3/ AMCEN Special Consultation on the UNFCCC and its Kyoto Protocol and related multilateral environmental agreements, held in Nairobi, Kenya on 19-23 October 1998.

4/ This section draws on the paper by UNDP entitled "Synergies in National Implementation of the Rio Agreements", August 1998, UNDP.

Furthermore, since traditional livestock raising depends on vegetation, which in turn depends on the soil, it is also conceivable that traditional dryland range management has been and continues to be guided by an awareness of soil conservation. Thus, it may be that range uses which inflict damage to the dryland biodiversity, initiating and accelerating topsoil erosion, ultimately result in desertification.

Dryland development: salinization on irrigated land

15. Soil salinization results from improper irrigation. Because of the high evaporation rates in drylands and since water scarcity does not allow using large quantities of water for leaching soils, mismanaged dryland irrigation might bring about soil salinization. Rates of salinization vary according to irrigation practices and land uses. Soil salinity may eventually reach a threshold point beyond which the cropland can no longer be maintained and is abandoned. Indigenous rangeland vegetation which is not sufficiently salt-tolerant may render the transformation from rangeland to cropland somewhat difficult, and its plant diversity may never be restored.

B. Climate change, biodiversity and desertification

Climate change and vegetation

16. Vegetation acts as a carbon sink; plants convert the naturally occurring atmospheric greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide, into solid organic material, i.e., tissues that form the plants' organs, trunks, roots, leaves etc. Thus, the global biota, of which plants constitute the largest fraction by mass, functions as a natural biosphere "reservoir". Damage to this reservoir releases the stored carbon to the atmosphere in the form of carbon dioxide, and impairs further sink functions.

17. When rangeland is transformed into cropland, the vegetation cover of the agricultural crop may be even greater than that of the natural vegetation. But this does not necessarily mean that the carbon sink increases. Many crops are annual, and are harvested for use after a few months. With this use, organic carbon is oxidized to produce carbon dioxide. There is often a time lapse between harvesting one crop and sowing the next, whence the carbon sink capacity may be lost.

18. The carbon storage capacity of an ecosystem and the intensity of its sink services are largely determined by the amount of plant material in place. Although some species may be interchangeable, the degree of redundancy in the functional interactions of dryland species has not yet been evaluated. Therefore, it is prudent to conserve the entire biodiversity as a precautionary measure for preserving the sink capacity of dryland vegetation.

Global climate change and regional desertification

19. Desertification is closely inter-dependent with reductions in global carbon reservoirs and sinks. In this sense, desertification contributes to global warming, with its resulting impacts at the regional and local levels. It is predicted that an increase in global temperature of one to two degrees Celsius by 2030 to 2050 will result in climate change in regions affected by desertification5/. That is expected, for example, to cause higher evaporation, decreased soil moisture and increased land degradation in the Middle East and arid parts of Asia; increase drought frequency in Africa, and increase vulnerability of arid and semi-arid lands to desertification. Thus, while global climate change is expected to exacerbate regional and local desertification processes, the causes and results of desertification in turn also exacerbate global climate change, mainly through their effect on vegetation.

V. AREAS FOR INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION TO EXPLORE SYNERGIES AMONG RIO CONVENTIONS

20. This section addresses several of the areas for synergies among the conventions following the order of appearance of these areas in the UNCCD.

5/ *The Regional Impacts of Climate Change*. 1998. Edited by R.T. Watson, M.C. Zinyowera and R.H. Moss, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

(a) Science, systematic observation, research and development, transfer, acquisition, adaptation and development of technology

21. Initial communication has been started among secretariats to enhance linkages between the subsidiary bodies of the conventions: the CBD Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (CBD/SBSTTA), the UNFCCC Subsidiary Body on Scientific and Technological Advice (UNFCCC/SBSTA) and the UNCCD Committee on Science and Technology (UNCCD/CST). Moreover, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Bank and the United States National Aeronautics and Space Administration launched a joint initiative to explore the scientific and policy linkages among the major global environmental conventions. The report entitled *Linking Environmental Issues with Human Needs: Opportunities for Strategic Interventions*, was presented by UNEP during the UNFCCC COP 4 in Buenos Aires in November 1998. Also, a recent workshop convened by the UNFCCC/SBSTA in Rome (24-25 September 1998), and held back-to-back with a technical meeting of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), addressed the issue of land use, land-use change and forestry. Furthermore, the World Resource Institute in a joint effort with the World Bank, UNDP and UNEP will also prepare a contribution to scientific interlinkages at the time of the World Resources Report of 2000.

22. In this context, there exists a high potential to undertake joint networking efforts to strengthen scientific capacities in developing countries in support of their commitments under the Rio conventions. Additionally, parties to the conventions could consider developing common/joint teams among the three subsidiary bodies for treatment of issues of shared concern such as technology transfer and adaptation, resource degradation in coastal areas, and integrated climate impact assessment.

23. Special efforts would be required to integrate teams at national levels with the various scientific and academic groups working on these issues in order to increase their capacity to assist governments in policy formulation.

(b) Capacity building, including approaches for work at the global, regional, subregional, national and local levels6/

24. At least three ongoing programmes should be mentioned here. Firstly, the UNESCO Programme on Environment and Population Education for Development (EPD) is working with the CBD, UNFCCC and UNCCD secretariats on the development of common approaches for synergies on education. Secondly, the three Rio convention secretariats have each developed capacity-building programmes in a selected number of countries with assistance from UNITAR and UNDP/Train X programmes. Finally, the UNEP Information Unit on Conventions has been assisting the convention secretariats in their activities on public information and awareness. Many other organizations within and outside the United Nations system have developed valuable awareness materials. In this regard, it would be useful to develop a joint database with the content and availability of all awareness materials to be disseminated systematically to national focal points of conventions. In the context of the follow up to the 1997 UNDP Synergy Workshop, joint work will also be undertaken to identify capacity building needs of national focal points, and to develop appropriate responses.

(c) Information systems: exchange of information, networking, clearing-house mechanisms

25. The CBD, UNFCCC and UNCCD secretariats have started a process to develop a joint programme to explore synergies in information management, including support to information management at the national level, a common Web page,

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6/ On these subjects, several other activities have been developed by agencies, not always however in collaboration with the CBD, UNFCCC and UNCCD secretariats. Several international, regional or subregional agencies are undertaking some activity dealing with the synergies among the Rio conventions: UNEP (GEF Unit, Desertification Programme, etc), UNDP/SEED (United Nations Office to Combat Desertification and Drought (UNSO), GEF Unit, Capacity 21), World Meteorological Organization (WMO) (for CCD and UNFCCC mainly), FAO (for CBD and UNCCD mainly), UNESCO, World Bank, GEF, regional economic commissions, regional development banks, Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), World Conservation Union (IUCN), World Wild Fund for Nature (WWF) and several other intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations.

development of common databases and linkages with other relevant processes in this area. This is a first step towards increasing and enhancing the exchange and sharing of information among the three secretariats and their national focal points. It could evolve to promote partnerships and greater efficiency and effectiveness in assisting governments and other relevant organizations in their implementation of the conventions. Additionally, following a recommendation of the Synergy Workshop and subsequent consultations, UNDP in collaboration with the secretariats has established a Web site which contains a joint database of national focal points for all three conventions, as well as other material relevant to the synergy process.

(d) Financial mechanisms (GEF and International Fund for Agriculture (IFAD))

26. Work is being done, in particular by GEF, to address the linkages and possible synergies among the three conventions and other GEF subjects such as international waters and ozone protection[7]. Other relevant multilateral and bilateral donor agencies (e.g. OECD and Fonds Français pour l'Environnement Mondial (FFEM)) are also interested in supporting similar efforts. It is expected that with the establishment of the UNCCD Global Mechanism at IFAD, it will support such initiatives. More, however, remains to be done to facilitate the closer collaboration among all relevant multilateral and bilateral donor agencies in search of greater effectiveness and efficiency in the investment of their resources. In particular, efforts could be made to develop a strong partnership between the GEF and the Global Mechanism to address the needs of the three conventions in the most integrated manner for the benefit of national level activities geared towards their effective implementation.

(e) National reporting and communication of information

27. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN/DESA), in response to United Nations General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS) and Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) mandates, is also addressing the need to streamline national reporting for conventions, Agenda 21 and related processes. Initial contacts have been made among the CBD, UNFCCC and UNCCD secretariats to develop a joint programme for assisting a selected number of Parties in the coordination at the national level of their reports/communications to the three conventions.

28. The formulation of national reports under the three conventions requires considerable efforts from Parties. A mechanism by which such efforts could be coordinated, allowing for the best use of national capacities and ensuring long-term-oriented capacity building of focal points is most desirable. Additionally, it could greatly facilitate the most effective and efficient use of resources of the three secretariats in providing assistance to national focal points by exchanging and sharing knowledge, expertise and other resources as appropriate when responding to national demands. Each report should point out its relevance and linkages to the reports submitted in compliance with other conventions.

(f) Principles and procedures; terms and definitions, measures to resolve questions of implementation, dispute settlement mechanisms, etc

29. The UNEP and IUCN environmental law centres have developed actions in this regard. Moreover, UNITAR together with the IUCN Environmental Law Centre is developing an international programme of training for the application of environmental law. These initiatives aim to develop gradually, with the assistance of relevant academic institutions, common principles, approaches and procedures for the consolidation of sustainable development's practice, by continuous strengthening of the legislative base required for policy-making. A closer collaboration with clear modalities between the institutions mentioned above and the three secretariats is needed in order to enhance the effects of these initiatives and help disseminate their early results.

7/ See: "A Framework of GEF Activities Concerning Land Degradation", GEF, Washington, 1996 and "Synthèse du séminaire de Ouagadougou (1-3 juillet 1997) sur le Fonds pour l'Environnement Mondial et la lutte contre la désertification", Secrétariat de l'Etat Français à la Coopération - SOLAGRAL, novembre 1997.

(g) COPs and subsidiary bodies: scheduling of meetings and appropriate representation, regional groupings, bureaux, expanded bureaux, etc

30. At its nineteenth special session (23-27 June 1997), the United Nations General Assembly stressed the fact that "[g]iven the increasing number of decision-making bodies concerned with various aspects of sustainable development, including international conventions, there is an ever greater need for better policy coordination at the intergovernmental level as well as for continued and more concerted efforts to enhance collaboration among the secretariats of those decision-making bodies". It recommended that "the conference of the Parties to conventions signed at the Rio Conference or as a result of it, as well as other conventions related to sustainable development, should cooperate in exploring ways and means of collaborating in their work to advance the effective implementation of the conventions". It further suggested that "the convention secretariats should give consideration to improving the scheduling of meetings, to integrating national reporting requirements and to improving the balance between sessions of the conference of the parties and sessions of their subsidiary bodies ..."

31. Given their institutional arrangements and administrative linkage with the United Nations Secretariat, the UNFCCC and UNCCD secretariats will be in a position as of 1999, to plan together, share resources and join efforts when convening meetings in Bonn.

32. Through collaborative efforts, effectiveness of meetings could be increased and participation of Parties and observers facilitated in sessions of the COPs and subsidiary bodies by planning and convening meetings in a coordinated manner, including by holding back-to-back events whenever possible.

VI. STEPS AHEAD: PRIORITIES AND MODALITIES TO ENHANCE COOPERATION AMONG RIO CONVENTIONS CONSISTENT WITH THEIR EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION PROCESSES

33. The Conference of the Parties may wish to consider and approve the line of action proposed in this document and give guidance to the UNCCD secretariat on how priority areas and modalities for cooperation may be identified on the subject of synergies. The following paragraphs suggest possible steps ahead for consideration by the Conference of the Parties at its second session. They do not imply any order of priority and could be undertaken jointly or independently as may be agreed upon by the Parties to the UNCCD.

34. The Conference of the Parties may wish to encourage the formulation of specific actions at the national level to further develop synergy processes that would contribute to a more effective implementation of the Rio conventions. Building on the initiatives described in previous sections above, possible action may be taken at the national level among focal points of the various conventions with a view to enhancing synergy and requesting further guidance from the respective conference of the Parties on a joint synergy initiative.

35. The Conference of the Parties may also request the secretariat to continue dialogue with other relevant convention secretariats as well as international organizations with a view to seeking synergies and providing joint assistance to national focal points for the formulation of national reports and communications.

36. The Conference of the Parties may also wish to request the secretariat to continue the collaboration initiated with other convention secretariats and relevant international organizations such as UNDP, UNEP and GEF.

37. Finally, there is a growing consensus for special attention to be given to education and public awareness activities in support of the Rio conventions. A joint synergy initiative to support the development of databases on education and public awareness materials in collaboration with UNESCO and IUCN, among other organizations, would provide cost-effective assistance to national focal points. This would supplement their efforts to educate and increase awareness on sustainable development issues and, in particular, to introduce biodiversity, climate change and desertification awareness in national policy-making processes. Likewise, this initiative could also introduce such themes in school curricula and in teacher training programmes. Additionally, it would help in addressing public awareness needs and keep the public and relevant organizations abreast of developments and of resources available at the international level.

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